

**No Turning Back:  
Sweet Briar Women During World War I**

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## No Turning Back:

### Sweet Briar Women During World War I

1914 was the beginning of World War I. American men left to fight in 1917, and when they did, they left behind a number of responsibilities. Women were called into action, and soon found themselves working in factories and running the business their husband left behind. The new opportunities impacted women of all different ages and social classes throughout the United States. Soon after women were settled and enjoying their new duties and responsibilities, the men returned from war and replaced the positions women had filled. Women were expected to return to their place in the home.

The changing world affected college students. Authors McCandless<sup>1</sup> and Gordon<sup>2</sup> studied women college students. McCandless focused on the restrictions and limitations of the southern women's colleges in the 1920-1940's, while Gordon compared the experience of women at coed institutions in the north to the experience of women at southern women's colleges during the Progressive Era.

Both Gordon and McCandless found southern women's colleges to have "numerous social restrictions governing on- and off-campus behavior," that were not found in the coed institutions in the north.<sup>3</sup> McCandless, in particular, felt that women's colleges in the South "were pressured to retain the rules and regulations which reinforced traditional views of woman's nature and sphere."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Amy T. McCandless, "preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-19140," in *History of Higher Education Annual*, 7 (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, (New Haven, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Grodon, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> McCandless, p 60.

In this essay I will explore the students' activities, interests, and rules of Sweet Briar College through the years 1914 to 1926 in order to determine whether Sweet Briar was an institution with frivolous rules or an environment that empowered women to explore non-traditional interests. I will use student publications, *The Briar Patch* and *The Sweet Briar Magazine*, to understand students' change in interest through the years of the war and the development of concerns and new clubs. *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College* provides information on the involvement of Sweet Briar students in the regulations of Sweet Briar rules as well as how the rules changed over time. In order to get a sense of the faculty involvement in the regulation of rules I have used the faculty rulings of 1919. These rulings also bridge that gap between the missing publications of *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College*. And finally, notes from faculty meetings and the Dean's report lend information on the activity and rebellious activity of students in the years following World War I. I hope to use these sources to understand what students' interest were during the years of the war, and if and how these interest changed over the years 1914 to 1926. I also hope to understand the extent of Sweet Briar College's rules and how involved the college was in the social lives of its students.

When World War I began in 1914, Sweet Briar College provided an environment where women took advantage of opportunities to explore their interests. Girls were involved in clubs such as YWCA, choir, orchestra, and Student Government.<sup>5</sup> The girls produced two publications, *The Sweet Briar Magazine*, and *The Briar Patch*. They had active tennis, and basketball teams, and most students participated in the field day competitions. Sweet Briar women gained leadership and physical skills from taking part

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in activities that girls at coeducational institutions would not be encouraged to participate in. The senior girls' ambitions for post graduation plans reflect their confidence and desire to be leaders. One senior aspired to be a speaker in The House of Representatives, another to be the First Lady President of New Jersey, while others looked forward to finding "a rich and handsome husband."<sup>6</sup> In the early years of the war Sweet Briar women were enthusiastic, and ready to take advantage of opportunities that might arise.

As confident leaders, the young women at Sweet Briar encouraged one another and understood that in order for the school to function they each had to do their part. In the March 1915 edition of the Sweet Briar Magazine the YWCA statement reminded the girls, "for it is the girls who make the rules, and it is the girls who must uphold them.... each girl knows that she is a small part of a larger whole, and she is just as important in the working out of the growth of the school and its standards as anyone else."<sup>7</sup> By running their Student Government, Sweet Briar women learned leadership skills and facilitation skills which they would use in the following months to develop the organization of new clubs and activities that explored their interests.

In 1915 the Sweet Briar students developed a more active interest in the war and thus founded the Current Events club.<sup>8</sup> Miss Sparrow organized the club, which met once a week to discuss either events of recent occurrence or subjects of pertinent interest in the present day."<sup>9</sup> The meetings consisted of a brief statement of the happenings of the week followed by a discussion about the prominent characters of the day and then a talk or debate about some vital current event such as "Dumba's Relations with the United

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Maurice, ed. *The Briar Patch 1914-1915*. Sweet Briar College Archives Rm 2.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice, p. 132-138.

<sup>7</sup> Constance Russele, ed. "YWCA," in *The Sweet Briar Magazine 1915*, vol. 6, no. 3, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Howison, ed. "Editorial," in *The Sweet Briar Magazine 1915*, vol. 7, no. 1, 24.

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States” or “Is America Prepared for War?”<sup>10</sup> The goal of the club was to “learn a great deal in a short time about the happenings of the world, to have an opinion about these happenings and to express that opinion.”<sup>11</sup> By 1915 Sweet Briar women were involved and educating themselves about the issues taking place throughout the world. These young ladies were taking an initiative to understand what was going on in the world and to work for the good. This ambitious attitude of Sweet Briar students prepared them for the events in the near future.

In 1917, the year America entered World War I, an editorial published in *The Sweet Briar Magazine* warned the Sweet Briar community that “we are living today in a troubled atmosphere.”<sup>12</sup> The editorial reflected the new attitude and responsibilities of a woman during the war period. Girls “have awakened to the fact that they are the ones who must be prepared to take the places in the world which their brothers are vacating, and are coming to college to become better prepared to meet this new responsibility.”<sup>13</sup> Sweet Briar women, who in the past found themselves working with the YWCA to volunteer in the Sunday school, now found themselves exploring new interests.

The students of Sweet Briar recognized the opportunity to explore fields that were traditionally filled by men. Men who recently left to fight in the war left opportunities and positions open to be filled by the women who remained at home. These young college women were preparing themselves to fill these newly opened positions by educating themselves in new fields. It is in the 1916-1917 academic year that Sweet Briar students’ academic and co-curricular interest changed. In the 1916-17 yearbook it is

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Seaver, ed. *The Briar Patch 1917-18*, Sweet Briar College Archives Rm 2, 155.

<sup>10</sup> Ellen Howison, ed. “Current Events Club,” in *The Sweet Briar Magazine 1915*, vol. 7, no. 1, 37.

<sup>11</sup> Howison, “Current Events Club,” 38.

<sup>12</sup> G. Elanette Sollitt, ed. “Editorial,” in *The Sweet Briar Magazine 1917*, vol. 9, no. 1, 31.

evident that it was popular to be a barer of the SB athletic letters. The senior pages show pictures of girls playing a sport, reading or carrying large stacks of academic books, looking in microscopes, studying a brain, working in a chemistry lab, or studying a globe.<sup>14</sup> It is also in that yearbook that the first Science Club is listed. Women were going to college to be doctors, chemists, and athletes, not just to make friends and have a good time.

Sweet Briar provided a learning environment for its students that prepared them physically and emotionally to tackle new responsibilities. The SGA had taught them to be leaders; the Current Events Club encouraged them to voice their opinions, and athletics kept them in physical condition. Sweet Briar had prepared these women with confidence and leadership skills so that when America entered World War I they were ready to take advantage of the opportunities presented to them.

The student magazines and articles written about the SGA encouraged the girls to be active in any way they can. The SGA encouraged the girls, "our college affords us the opportunity of 'trying ourselves out'."<sup>15</sup> G. Elanette Sollitt encouraged the girls to write. She states, "the things that are really worth while in literature are the thoughts of and the expressions of those thoughts by educated, thinking people, and we are the educated women of our country, we college girls."<sup>16</sup>

"The girls heard the call and they strove to answer it."<sup>17</sup> They started an American Red Cross unit in April of 1917. The girls worked on average three hours a week making materials, and raising money. Sweet Briar women were involved in war activities trying to

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<sup>13</sup> Sollitt, "Editorial," p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Watkins, ed. *The Briar Patch* 1916-17, 186-195.

<sup>15</sup> Sollitt, ed. "SGA," p. 35

<sup>16</sup> Sollitt, ed. "SGA," p. 34.



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help their country in any way they could. Students' interests in and outside of the classroom were changing. The women felt a sense of duty and responsibility to educate themselves and work for the good of their country

The girls invested even more into their academic work, taking on more non-traditional roles because they were in an environment that welcomed them to explore new interests. In the 1918 academic year Sweet Briar had to invest in more science equipment and laboratories. "Several laboratory assistants have been engaged to take care of the unusually large registration in chemistry."<sup>18</sup> The college not only increased their courses in Psychology, History, English, and languages, they offered special war curriculum "in order to meet the responsibilities placed upon women by the war situation, extracurricular emergency courses in food production, and food conservation, in war diet, in dairying, in typing, in public speaking, and in wireless telegraphy, will be given during the spring."<sup>19</sup>

Sweet Briar women really did take on the call for help to lead their country through the war while the men fighting. Sweet Briar College provided the perfect environment for these girls to experience leadership, and grow academically in subjects they found interesting. They learned how to think independently and express themselves. When Sweet Briar women were given the opportunity to use the skills the college had prepared them with, they took off to soar. Their response to the war was overwhelming and caught many people off guard, even some of the girls themselves.

With the enthusiastic response of the Sweet Briar students and their success of adapting to traditionally male roles, the students were reminded of their traditional place

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<sup>17</sup> G. Elanette Sollitt, ed. *The Briar Patch 1918*, Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm 2, 166.

<sup>18</sup> G. Elanette Sollitt, ed. "The Purpose and Progress of Sweet Briar," in *The Briar Patch 1918*, Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm. 2, 159.

<sup>19</sup> Sollitt, ed. "The Purpose and Progress of Sweet Briar," p. 159.

in society. The same editorial in *The Sweet Briar Magazine* that encouraged the girls to take hold of the opportunities in front of them, attempts to warn them not to loose their feminine charm.<sup>20</sup> A student writes, "in our earnest enthusiasm to 'amount to something' we must not forget the old ways while we are following the new."<sup>21</sup> Some students and faculty tried to impress upon the girls that with all the new responsibilities of the day the college women must not forget to be girls.<sup>22</sup> However, the majority of the girls were so involved in their new academic subjects, leadership roles, and work for the war that they did not waste their time with such comments.

Sweet Briar women were gaining new respect for themselves and confidence in exploring non-traditional female interests. Along with this confidence, the students wanted more freedom and independence. It is not until 1916 that the women of Sweet Briar College asked for special privileges for the senior class. The senior girls wanted more freedom and independence. They asked for voluntary chapel attendance, permission to leave school at their own discretion, the ability to take a train to Lynchburg without a chaperone, and to entertain company on a weekday.<sup>23</sup> This was the students' first attempt for independence. The petition for voluntary chapel attendance was granted, but the others were denied. The seniors attempted once more to request "more freedom in the choice of times when they may be away" from campus, but again they were denied.<sup>24</sup> After this event nothing more on the topic was discussed during the years 1916-1919.

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<sup>20</sup> Sollitt, ed. "SGA," p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Sollitt, ed. "Editorial," p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Sollitt, ed. "Editorial," p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Faculty Meeting September 26, 1916. Sweet Briar College Faculty Notes 1916-1919. Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm 2.

<sup>24</sup> Faculty Meeting October 11, 1916. Sweet Briar College Faculty Notes 1916-1919. Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm. 2.



It is not until 1918 when the war ended that Sweet Briar women began to feel the tension and suppression that McCandless discusses. After 1918, when the men returned from the war, Sweet Briar enforced more restrictions on the students in order to reinforce the "traditional views of woman's nature and sphere".<sup>25</sup>

After men returned from war, women throughout the United States had difficulty giving up their new freedom, and responsibilities that they cherished so much. It was no different at Sweet Briar. In *The Sweet Briar Magazine* a student quoted Miss Eugenia Wallace, a business librarian of the Guaranty Trust Co. of New York who said....

Loss of man power, owing to the war, has created woman's greatest opportunity in business...the places that are open to women in the business world, are the places at the bottom of the ladder.... will women consent to 'lowering' themselves and work up, so that they may eventually fill those high places? They not only *will* do it, they *are* doing it.<sup>26</sup>

Women who had experienced the working world and who filled leadership roles while men were away fighting in the war were reluctant to give up their positions when the men returned. College women who had been educated in the sciences, mathematics, and business wanted to take their knowledge into the world and use it. They were no longer satisfied with staying at home. This aggressive enthusiasm to remain in the workforce lead to a restrictive period in Sweet Briar College's history.

In 1919 there is a noticeable increase in the restrictions of the student's personal lives. The earliest record of *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government*

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<sup>25</sup> McCandless, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> G. Elanette Sollitt, ed. "Editorials," in *The Sweet Briar Magazine* 1918, vol. 9, no. 4, 212.

*Association of Sweet Briar College* is from 1914.<sup>27</sup> The rules in 1914 addressed cutting chapel, lights out, disturbances during quiet hours and the penalties for failure to observe those rules.

*The Faculty Rulings* of 1919, serves to establish an understanding of academic standing and social expectations between the faculty and students.<sup>28</sup> *The Faculty Rulings* explain the guidelines for registration, courses of study, conditions of credits, transfers, and absences. But the faculty's responsibility did not end with academic classes. *The Faculty Rulings* of 1919 include social regulations. Under the heading, "Social," the faculty outline how many overnight absences a student is allowed per semester, in what circumstances a chaperone is required, and that no student may attend at any time a subscription dance."<sup>29</sup> The faculty had the power to limit and supervise the activity of the college girls in order to protect their female charm and keep them in their sphere.

In 1921 greater restrictions were set and enforced by the Student Government Association. The number of pages concerning the rules and penalties in *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government* for the year 1921 is tripled compared to the 1914 edition.<sup>30</sup> The rules are much more restricting, giving an in depth definition of the quiet hours, defining campus limits and at what times one is allowed to be off campus limits, with whom and at what times one can travel to and from Amherst, Lynchburg, and

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<sup>27</sup> The Student Government Association. *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College*, 1914.

<sup>28</sup> Sweet Briar Faculty. *Faculty Rulings 1919*, Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm 2, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Sweet Briar Faculty, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> The Student Government Association. *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College*, 1921.

the train station. There are specific rules concerning male visiting hours, chaperones, riding in cars with men, and at what time the men must leave campus.<sup>31</sup>

Sweet Briar's rules and regulations increased from the 1914 publication of *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government* to after World War I in the 1921 publication. The men returned home from fighting and the women were no longer needed. The women of Sweet Briar were expected to return to their pre war roles. The students obviously had no intentions of giving up their new ambitions and lifestyles. Sweet Briar used the rules and regulations to return the young ladies to the roles of a Southern lady by restricting her activity.

The college was successful in implementing the new regulations and boundaries; however, the college would soon noticed the objections from the students who did not want to conform to the image of a southern lady and respect the rules implemented by the college. In Faculty minutes from 1925-29 there are an increasing number of stories of rebellious girls who are expelled or suspended.<sup>32</sup>

I have found that Sweet Briar women during 1914 through 1927 did have strict rules and regulations concerning academics as well as social conduct. However, unlike McCandless, I did not find Sweet Briar women to be encouraged only in traditional roles, but rather I found that they had many more opportunities to explore fields that might not be encouraged at a larger coed institution, and were well prepared for the responsibilities expected of them during World War I. In 1918 when the War ended and the men returned to their jobs and reclaimed the responsibilities and activities that the women had adopted,

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<sup>31</sup> The Student Government Association. *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College*, 1921.

<sup>32</sup> Faculty Meeting May 21, 1926. Sweet Briar College Faculty Notes 1925-29. Sweet Briar college Archives, Rm. 2; Meta Glass, Report of the Dean 1927-28, Sweet Briar College Archives, Rm. 2.

I think that Sweet Briar College did enforce more rules, especially social restrictions, in efforts to preserve the image of the Southern lady. After World War I, Sweet Briar College became an institution that fit McCandless's description of a Southern women's college, Sweet Briar College was pressured "to retain the rule and regulations which reinforced traditional views of women's nature and sphere."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> McCandless, p 60.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Faculty minutes, Room 2, back right hand side of the room, second shelf up from the floor, Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Virginia.

This source provided me with the faculty opinions as well as information on petitions of the students, and student suspensions and expulsions.

Meta Glass, Report of the Dean 1927-1928, Room 2, in a folder on the table tilted "Miscellaneous 1927-29", Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Virginia.

This source provided me with the Dean's update on the academic year. I received information on student suspensions and expulsions.

Student Government Association, Sweet Briar College Handbooks, 1906- 1998 (except years 1907, 1910, 1912, 1215-20, and 1924-27), Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Virginia.

These source was valuable to me for comparing the changes in rules and regulations over the years of World War I. I had to do some filling in of the gaps because the main years are missing.

Student Government Association, *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Student Government Association of Sweet Briar College*, 1914-1980 (only including the years, 1914, 1921, 1927, 1928, 1952-53, 1964-1980), Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia.

This source was valuable to me for comparing the changes in rules and regulations over the years of World Was I.

*The Briar Patch 1914-1920*. Rm. 2, front left hand side shelves, Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia.

The yearbooks helped me research what the girls were interested in, what clubs were active, which ones were new, old, what was and was not as popular.

The Sweet Briar Faculty, *Faculty Rulings*, 1919. Rm 2, left hand side of room, middle shelves, fourth shelf up from bottom. Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, Virginia.

This source helped me fill the gap of information between the Student Government Association's rules and regulations.

*The Sweet Briar Magazine*, 1909-1922 (except years 1912-1914), Archives of Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar Virginia.

This source gave me the students' opinion on what the girls were concerned with, and what was popular.

### **Secondary Sources:**

Gordon, Lynn. *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era* (New Haven 1990), 1-11, 33-35, 189-200.

This source gives background on the experiences of women college students at coed institutions in the North to the experience of women at Southern women's colleges.

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940", *History of Higher Education Annual*, 7 (1987).

This source gives background information on the restrictions of Southern women's colleges compared to coed institutions, and women's colleges in the North.